It's Feeling a Little Swampy

Columbia County Fast Tracks Vanity Farm, Says Environmental Study Not Needed

Joshua Powell

Good morning readers,

Small town government has always been a soup made with a rich stock of altruism and civic-mindedness, with *huge* chunks of self-dealing and glad-handing. In a town like Chatham in a county like Columbia, you can get away with murder. *Literally.*

Last night the Columbia County Board of Supervisors voted to approve Resolutions 69-2026 and 70-2026, adding new properties to Agricultural Districts #9 and #10 and declaring — **without a full Environmental Impact Statement** — that the additions would have no significant environmental impact. By law, they have to justify this position. If you haven't read about Nassau Lake and the Superfund site right up the road that continues to dump toxins that travel through the back of North Chatham and into Kinderhook Creek, Kinderhook Lake, and the Hudson River, you should. (You can read about it here)

Interestingly, no actual addresses were included on the properties posted in the agenda or discussed last night. Maybe Dr. Tanner is opening a pig farm. Could be Jeff Levine is starting up an apiary with a honey-based bakery. Is Dr. Gregory's Spur open for happy hour? Could be, but it's not. It's Falcon Crest part deux.

If you're late to the party, last night's meeting was to ratify motions made at the January hearing based on Williams' application to change his property from RL-2 to Agriculture — you know, those meetings that were quietly held with notice provided in a paper that few in Chatham actually subscribe to.

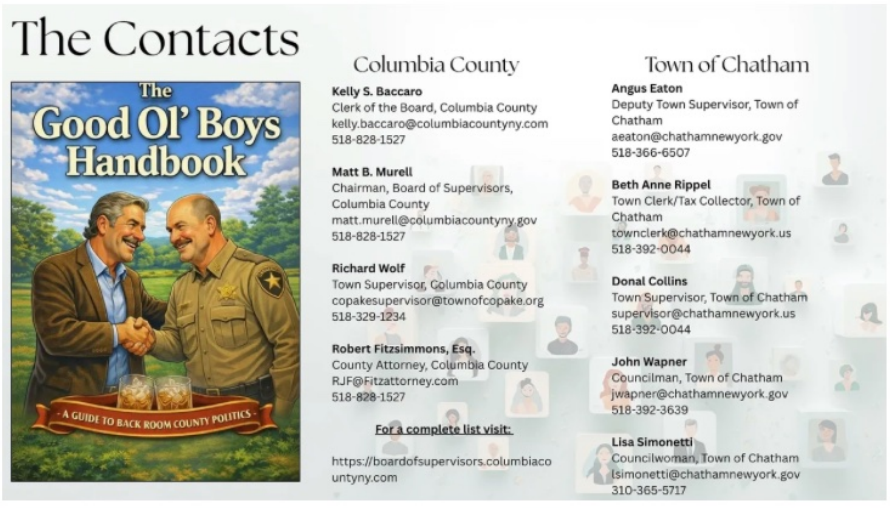
Could there be an issue with notice, that pesky requirement that could set this entire process back? Don't know. I'm waiting on both the town and the county to provide proof of process, now subject to a FOIL request. Under New York's Freedom of Information Law, agencies have five days to acknowledge receipt of a request and twenty days to provide the information. The county acknowledged it. (Click here) I've heard nothing from the Town of Chatham. Tick tock, Chatham.

What I did hear from the town was a response to my earlier inquiry — ironically "mansplaining," if you will (it was penned by a woman) — on how the town's committees work. They're set up like Chinese walls, all acting independently. That's a little far-fetched when Mr. Collins sits on the majority of them. (Click here)

I am operating on the assumption that Dr. Williams submitted his application to the county during the October 2025 inclusion period. The FOIL requests to both the town and county will confirm which properties were added and when. If Fox Hill is on that list, the implications are significant. Agricultural district membership confers right-to-farm protections, favorable tax assessments, and restrictions on what local government can do to regulate operations on that land — protections designed for working farms, not vanity vineyards.

The county's resolution now goes to the NYS Commissioner of Agriculture and Markets, who has 30 days to certify whether the inclusions are feasible and serve the public interest. ***That certification is not automatic.*** The regulation is for farmers - working farmers. Reaching out this NYS department could be very important. All the contact information is on the link above.

Then there's SEQR. **The county issued a negative declaration**, meaning it determined these additions will have no significant environmental impact. SEQR, or State Environmental Quality Review, is a process established under New York's Environmental Conservation Law that requires all state and local government agencies to consider environmental impacts before approving, funding, or undertaking actions. When a project is proposed — such as a rezoning, special use permit, or site plan approval — the lead agency must complete an Environmental Assessment Form to determine whether it may have a significant adverse environmental impact. I'm curious how and why the county thinks this was appropriate. Know this: without adequate supporting analysis, a SEQR negative declaration can be challenged through an Article 78 proceeding. The statute of limitations is four months from today.



Two supervisors were absent: Donal Collins of Chatham and Timothy Ooms of Kinderhook. Collins' absence matters. He is Chatham's Town Supervisor, a member of the county Board, and has a business relationship with Dr. Edwin Williams — who has spent five years seeking every available classification and protection for a $4.5 million estate that produces, at best, twelve cases of wine per year. That business relationship has never been publicly disclosed. No one knows the terms. Both Collins and Williams have been asked, and they won't tell. A FOIL request asking whether Collins has ever recused himself from Fox Hill-related decisions remains unanswered.

There is a reason Dr. Williams has a pile of money. He is relentless. Five years, multiple applications, every angle, every classification, every protection — he does not stop. Take a page out of his playbook. Be just as persistent. Be just as relentless. The difference is that you're fighting for your neighborhood, not a tax break.

What you can do right now:

Call or email Donal Collins and ask him directly: was your decision not to participate in last night's vote influenced by your business relationship with Dr. Williams? Have you ever disclosed that relationship? Have you ever recused yourself from any matter involving Fox Hill?

Supervisor Donal Collins: supervisor@chathamnewyork.us | 518-392-0044

Reach out to Dr. Edwin and Cheri Williams. Ask them whether they applied for agricultural district inclusion in October. Ask them what agricultural activity on their property justifies the protections they're seeking. They have made it clear how they feel about their neighbors' concerns. Perhaps they'd like to say it on the record.

And if you have information about which properties were added last night, or about the January 6th public hearing, I want to hear from you: (This is my email!) josh@thepowellhousepress.com. Before you do: click here to understand the process of sharing things with journalist before you reach out to me.

Know this, this story is taking on a lot of interest. So reading this manual is important not just when you're talking with me, but when other reporters might inquire about this.

The clock is running. More to come. This story will continue next Wednesday.

P.S. And about that murder...it's real, and it will show exactly how Columbia County can work if the right palms are greased. See you all next Wednesday.

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